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ABSTRACT

This paper shares the author's thoughts on the required New York State Regents examinations: namely, that the exams, now an integral part of social studies courses, are in some ways a real deterrent to relevant learning. Recommendations were made by the House of Delegates of the New York State Council for the Social Studies (the state-wide professional organization of social studies teachers) to "discontinue the Regents examination program in the social studies." In response to a position offered by one favoring retention of the exams, that the teachers real job is to get his students to pass the Regents, and in support of "the teaching as telling" model, the author presents a tongue in cheek proposal in the "rhetorical mode" to make the singular purpose of social studies and education in general the explicit preparation of students to pass the Regents exams. The paper tends to show the need to answer the question "what is the purpose of education?" (SJM)

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THE NEW YORK STATE REGENTS EXAMINATIONS: A PROPOSAL FOR THE REALIST

by

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In the wake of rumors that the New York State "Regents examination" in history might be discontinued, social studies educators are debating the pros and cons of the State's distinctive examination program.

The supervision and direction of all educational activities in New York State is the responsibility of the Board of Regents--a group of 15 lay persons elected by the State Legislature. Authority to administer examinations comes from the Education Law. The Regents examinations are the most distinctive feature of New York State's testing program.

First administered in 1865, the Regents examinations were originally high school admissions tests; now they are end-of-course high school achievement tests--indeed, they have become an integral part of the course itself.

The Regents examination is the product of a committee of teachers working under the direction of a State supervisor responsible for instruction and curriculum in the designated area.

> Precautions are taken at every step to preserve the security and integrity of Regents examinations. The examinations are printed in the Department's own plant in Albany. They are packaged in sealed envelopes and are sent to the schools in locked steel boxes. The administration of the examinations in each school, at a uniform time throughout the State, is under the direct supervision and responsibility of the principal, who is the official deputy of the State Education Department.[1]

The examinations are rated locally by teachers using uniform answer keys and rating guides provided by the State Education Department. A representative sampling of rated papers is forwarded to the state capital for review by a special staff, with results of the review being reported back to each school.

Given the background of these "teacher-prepared and teacher-rated State examinations" and the fact that for more than a century the Regents examinations have extended a strong influence on learning and instruction

at the secondary school level, it is noteworthy that the House of Delegates of the New York State Council for the Social Studies--the state-wide professional organization of social studies teachers--approved a resolution (April, 1971) recommending: "discontinuance of the Regents examination program in the social studies."[2]

Supporters of the Regents examinations claim that they are of great benefit in "establishing structure," "maintaining standards," and so on. Critics argue that the Regents examinations have a "stultifying effect" upon education, that it is more important to "prepare students for life than tests," and so on. I would like to share my thoughts on this "Regents issue" with my social studies colleagues--recognizing that this is a highly controversial issue, dealing with long standing traditions and involving deeply held beliefs, attitudes, and values.

A PROPOSAL

In the social studies, the 'teaching as telling" model appears to have been rather well received by many of our colleagues--so much so that this might almost be considered a "universal model." I realize full well that this is a gross overstatement, but from this point on this paper is written in the "rhetorical mode."

Educational research clearly shows us that other models are available--see for example, N. L. Gage (ed.) Handbook of Research on Teaching (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1963). However, when someone suggests that we might do well to re-consider the concept of "teaching as telling" as the universal model, the reply sounds something very much like this:

> "Oh, sure, some of the things you talk about may sound good and all that, but you're just not realistic. You have got to face the facts of life. I can't afford to waste time with developing social studies concepts, inquiry, original sources, historiography, and things like that! I've got to get down to the real hard business of getting my kids to pass the Regents."

If this is the case, I then offer "the realist" the following proposal: If passing the Regents becomes the "raison d'etre," then let's

strip our social studies teaching of all pretense to do any thing except this. The model I propose for "the realist" is that of job analysis!

Let's be honest with the student at the outset and make clear what are the rules of the game. This means that we tell the student just why he is there and exactly what the real goal is. We could begin our "instruction" with a content analysis of the Regents exams extending back over the past five years. There shouldn't be any problem here of securing the appropriate "instructional materials." Past Regents exams published in inexpensive paperback editions are widely available in school bookstores, "drug stores," and even in some supermarkets. For more "advanced students," we could extend the "scope and sequence" to exams covering the past ten years, or possibly longer in cases of the "extremely gifted." The object of the analysis would be to identify the nature of the content tested and the types of questions asked: i.e., the who's, what's, when's, where's, why's, and so on. Perhaps a master chart and tally might even be developed. This should have special appeal to those who have for many years been telling us that the purpose of history is "that the future may learn from the past."

We could then lead the student in a search for trends--a definite line of development over a period of time. Are there any topics or data subsumed under these topics which appear to be tested for year after year? Such items should be pointed to as "classics"; they are eternal verities which have withstood the test of time. To facilitate retention of the "classics," the teacher could employ the standard mnemonic devices, or, for even greater "power" (to be sure we get in some Bruner) the teacher might introduce the student to the well-known work of Dr. Bruno Furst, described in The Practical Way to a Better Memory (Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1960)--also available in an inexpensive paperback edition.

Along with this, of course, we could teach the students how to become sophisticated test-takers. This involves such learnings as: eliminating detractors in multiple choice questions to reduce the odds of

guessing; understanding the implications of the research findings concerning the changing of first answers in a multiple choice test and the ratio between the number right and the number wrong of such altered responses; answering essay questions with clearly thought out and thoroughly organized platitudes which require a minimum of factual data, and so on. No wonder so many of our colleagues say they can't afford to waste time with a "Regents class"; there's a lot to be done.

We could use the study of past test questions to enable us to predict probable items for the next Regents examination--the moment of truth. We could work at this seriously, marshalling our skill to maximize the student's chances for "doing well." Sometimes called "getting through"; also referred to in some circles as "learning."

Well, what do you think of the proposal? I <u>was</u> going to call it an "innovative" approach to the teaching of social studies, but then I got to thinking about the meaning of the word "innovation" and . . . . . .

FOOTNOTES

[1] Sherman N. Tinkelman, Regents Examinations in New York State After 100 Years (Albany, New York: The State Education Department, 1966), p. 9. This bulletin is a copy of an address given by the Assistant Commissioner for Examinations and Scholarships on October 30, 1965 at the Invitational Conference on Testing Problems, sponsored by the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, New Jersey.

[2] Social Science Record (Fall, 1971), p. 4.